

Celebrating our Independence - How and Why?

Bhikkhu Professor Dhammavihari

On the fourth day of the month of February every year we celebrate Sri Lanka's independence. Four years ago, in 1998, we celebrated the fiftieth year of Independence. Veteran Independents indeed, we are.

What an emergent nation like Sri Lanka [and with more than fifty years of emerging at that] needs is not a shower of blessings or a bouquet of well wishing from anybody's hands or in any body's name. If wishes were horses, they say, beggars would be kings. Let each one of us in Sri Lanka, the rulers and the ruled, look into ourselves seriously on this day. Anybody born, not much later than our Independence day of fourth February 1948, would today easily be at the head of two generations, as a father or a mother with a son or daughter and perhaps many more of them. If they were wiser and luckier, they could even be grand parents by now, with three generations to count.

With this aging as an invariably self-operating process, where do we stand? Are these independent people of Sri Lanka any the wiser for this aging? Psychologists of the Western world today put forward a brave new line of thinking in which they speak of **aging and sageing**. That people as they get older in years should show greater maturity in their thinking and in their behaviour.

In this third millennium, we do need to look at ourselves and at the things we do with a greater degree of diligence and circumspection. Otherwise, individually or as a nation, we shall never make it to the moon, Jupiter or Saturn, i.e. reach commendably greater heights in this ever competitive world.

On gaining independence, did we really ever achieve anything? The historical fact of it is that after nearly a century and a half, we did **disengage ourselves** from the **colonial rule** of the **British Raj**. Many others besides me,

historians and saner brands of sociologists, would add here the word **shackles** to colonial rule. A true concept of independence would naturally lend support to this. Being under the yoke of any foreign rule invariably implied **impediments to one's own national and indigenous growth**, in more ways than one. Does the awareness of this or the sensitivity to it need to be brand-named as **chauvinist**? Let us bravely ask **who says so** and **for what specific purpose**?

By the time the British came on the scene, we had already been battered twice before by invading colonialists from the west, the Portuguese and the Dutch. It is true that they did bring to the shores of Sri Lanka red wine and white bread. On the one hand, and there is no getting behind this fact, these invaders were politically motivated expansionists. They surely were no Pilgrim Fathers, as far as we know. They were determined to build for themselves empires in the maritime regions of Southern Asia. In this part of the world, they found many things like spices etc. and plenty of raw materials like rubber and many minerals for their own industries which they could profitably take back home. This is how they built up their imperial affluence.

This move of theirs was more than amply supported by yet another high-powered under current, namely the high tide of evangelism which closely accompanied it. A new religion, looking out for new pastures, was determined to make a violent conquest of the East, particularly of those regions which were falling under the political tyranny of the invader. The consequences were devastating. History bears ample testimony to this. On our side, let us remember, and by no means forget, the way in which Emperor Asoka of India sent Buddhism's message of peace over to his friend Devānampiya Tissa here in Sri Lanka. Or the manner in which the king of Paik Che in Korea sent Buddhism, with a note of very high commendation, to his friend in the neighbouring kingdom of Japan. No tears and never ever any drops of blood accompanied the process.

Buddhism, wherever it went, was never chaperoned with bayonets or gunpowder. Buddhism, with its amazingly reformist new liberal teachings

transformed and upgraded to higher levels of dignity local religious thinking and modified their religious practices, in a humanely acceptable way. Upholding this view and paying an unstinted tribute to Buddhism, Sri Jawahar Lal Nehru in his classic, **The Discovery of India**, says this of Buddhism.

"Buddhism spread rapidly in India from Kashmir to Ceylon. It penetrated into Nepal and later reached Tibet and China and Mongolia. In India one of the consequences of this was the growth of vegetarianism and abstention from alcoholic drinks. Till then both Brahmins and *Kshatriyas* often ate meat and took wine. Animal sacrifice was forbidden." p. 105

On a day like this, let us be sensibly reminded of what we have lost through centuries of colonial rule. What we have lost, or have being robbed of, is **a rich cultural heritage of more than twenty centuries** over which the wiser and impartial world outside, not politicians, keep continually applauding us. [Read the latest on this in **Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft** by Douglas Johnston and Cynthia Sampson - 1994. Oxford University Press].

This lost treasure has definitely to be retrieved. Policy makers of this country have to be sensitized on these lines and be made to feel the need for mining, and bringing to the surface, like the one-time lesser known gems of Ratnapura, the **wealth of wisdom for living, for the guidance of men and women, and equally well for the rulers and the ruled**, which was sent here by Emperor Asoka via Buddhism and thereafter upheld and cherished by the just and benevolent rulers of this island who were more or less required by the subsequent cultural tradition of the land to play the role of *Bodhisattvas* in the process of governance.

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